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C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 002919

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/31/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [IT](#) [EUN](#)

SUBJECT: SYRIA/LEBANON: ITALY WILL NOT ENGAGE SYRIA AT THE UNGA, WANTS IN ON CORE GROUP ON LEBANON

REF: A. STATE 159137

[B](#). ROME 1023

[C](#). ROME 1450

[D](#). ROME 1732

Classified By: DCM Anna Borg for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#). (C) Summary. Italy will follow its EU partners in not engaging with Syria at the UNGA. Though sharing our concerns about Syrian failure to meet its obligations under UNSCR 1559, Rome, however, still favors engagement over isolation. The Italian MFA believes that at some point the international community will have to start thinking about when it will be appropriate to restart a dialogue with Damascus. Meanwhile, the Italians are still pressing for inclusion in the Core Group on Lebanon. End summary.

Italy's "Frozen Dialogue" with Syria

[2](#). (C) DCM and PolOff delivered Ref A demarche to MFA Director General for the Mediterranean and Middle East Riccardo Sessa and Iraq Task Force Director Luigi Maccotta. Sessa, who will attend the UNGA, said that Italy will maintain EU cohesion by not engaging with Syria. Italy, including FM Fini, shares US concerns about Syria's failure to comply fully with UNSCR 1559, he added. Despite Italy's strong historic and cultural relationship with Syria, Sessa said Rome has frozen its dialogue with Damascus (Ref B), though there are still discussions at the Ambassadorial level; Sessa himself said he speaks regularly to Ambassador Al-Kassir in Rome (to whom he delivers "tough" messages) and had also spoken with Deputy Foreign Minister Mu'allim at a recent multilateral meeting. DCM had also raised Ref A with National Security Advisor Castellaneta on August 31. Castellaneta, who will accompany PM Berlusconi to UNGA, said Italy had not received any request to meet the Syrian delegation and assured us Italy would not do so.

But Warns Against Continuing Isolation

[3](#). (C) Sessa commented that the recent arrests of four pro-Syrian Lebanese security officials in connection with the assassination of former PM Hariri confirms that there are still "grey areas in Syrian attitudes," but argued that the ultimate question remains the same: confrontation/use of force or engagement/diplomacy? Italy, which has a different historical and cultural approach than the US toward the region, prefers a "culture of dialogue, even with your worst enemy, because you can convey the message," Sessa argued, adding that Syria takes messages coming from Italy seriously. Sessa said at some point the international community would have to start thinking about when the appropriate time will be to restart the dialogue. "The isolation of Syria is dangerous," he said. Because of the role Syria plays in regional stability, especially in Iraq and the Middle East Peace Process, a "realistic" strategy is needed, he added.

Still Seething at Exclusion from Core Group on Lebanon

[4](#). (C) Sessa took advantage of the meeting to raise again (Refs B and C) Italy's discontent at being excluded from the Core Group on Lebanon. Referencing recent meetings in Paris and London, Sessa said Italy, Lebanon's number one trade and economic partner and closest partner in the EU, cannot accept being excluded from formal discussions on Lebanon, especially those regarding preparations for the upcoming international conference. Sessa said he had just sent the Italian Embassy in Washington instructions to raise this issue.

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